

Will you eat your grits?

The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Parable of the Vineyard Workers
September 24, 2017

I remember the last time this passage came up we talked about it in the Thursday noon bible study. Sue Wells looked at me over her glasses and said, “I know I should love the bible, but this story bothers me. In fact I hate it, it is so unfair why do we have to read it?” Sue is far from alone in this view of this parable. I cannot think of another parable that people dislike more and there is the challenge, for I suspect that those listening to the parable in Jesus’ time would have been in agreement with Sue.

The previous passage ends with the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Then today’s passage begins with a parable that ends with the exact same pronouncement. In the very next few verses we have the mother of James and John asking Jesus if her boys can sit on the right and the left of him in heaven. There does seem to be a theme going here.

A vineyard is often a metaphor for the people of Israel and the vineyard owner is a metaphor for God. Some equate those called at different times to different tribes of Israel and the last as the Gentiles who have joined Matthew’s community. We know from the Book of Acts that the inclusion of Gentiles was the very first controversy of the early church and I suspect there was still a certain amount of us were here first from the Jewish members of the congregation. There were members of Matthew’s community that would have known Jesus personally. Maybe some Gentiles had been given prominent positions, who knows, but the friction was obviously there. At the least if you are going to look at metaphorical symbols, then the Gentiles are the workers hired at 5:00.

There are many themes that come to mind in this passage. Pastor Steve Garnaas-Homes came up with 10 different ones including gratitude, encouragement, wisdom, confession, self-awareness, justice, God’s freedom, presence, humility, and wonder. I posted them on the church’s Facebook page. I want to focus on gratitude and how we react to God’s grace. For if nothing else this is a parable about grace.

First a reminder of the definition of grace from our Prayer Book. “Grace is God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our mind, stirs our hearts and strengthens our wills.”

When I first got to St. Aidan’s I spent a fair amount of time talking with the Rev. Jo Taylor the interim. She told me a story that is appropriate for this morning’s gospel. A salesman from the north was down in Georgia calling on prospective clients. After packing his car he stopped at a little roadside restaurant across

from his motel for breakfast. The waitress came over and asked him for his order. He said, "I'll take 2 eggs scrambled, hash browns, toast and sausages." She told him she'd be right back as she filled his coffee cup. A few minutes later she came back with his order and placed a bowl of grits next to the plate with his order. He pointed to them and said, "What are these?" She replied, "Why those are grits." Puzzled he said, "Grits, I didn't order grits." She looked at him and said, "Honey everybody gets grits with breakfast down here. Now whether you eat them or not is your choice." Then Jo looked at me and said, "Mark, grace is like grits. You get them whether you want them or not. What you do with them is up to you."

God's grace is given to everybody. Whether we accept it or not is our choice. The challenge in today's parable is that God's economy of grace doesn't work the same as those systems we see in the world, regardless of economic system. That is the overriding fallacy of the whole prosperity gospel nonsense that says God's blessing is earned by our work or our faith. And thank God for God's economy! I'm really quite happy that I don't get exactly what I deserve when I consider my entire life. Think for a moment if every slight every "sin" you committed was punished. I can't speak for all of you, but this would be a miserable existence for most people.

I can't speak for those who were hired at dawn because I'm probably one of those 3:00 hires to the vineyard. I didn't have much use for church and to be honest for God until my mid 30s. You see I drifted along on the surface, yes I took my boys to church but to be honest I wasn't buying what that minister was selling. It wasn't until a real crisis that I found myself at St. Paul's Episcopal Church that I finally had my conversion moment. That was back in 1991 and I was baptized at the Easter Vigil in 1992. So I for one am grateful that those later workers got "what was right."

Nobody is beyond redemption and for me that is what this parable is about. This is an image God who never gives up on anyone. The parable of the Prodigal Son is another along this same line.

We sang the hymn Amazing Grace as our gradual hymn and I asked Jamie in our liturgical planning session to put that one there. I chose it not only because talks about grace, but because of the story behind the hymn.

John Newton is the composer of the poem that became the hymn. We sang the verses that he wrote. There are other verses that have been added in various hymnals in various denominations. John's father was a captain of a merchant ship and John sailed with him several times as a boy until he was impressed into service by the Royal Navy. Deserting because of the conditions he was captured and eventually ended up working on a slave ship. After a series of rather brutal adventures both on and off the sea he became the captain of a slave ship.

John had no real religious upbringing from his mother who died when he was a child. One voyage he was steering the ship through a violent storm when he had what he called a great deliverance. While he continued in the slave trade for three additional voyages he did strive to make sure the slaves under his care were taken care of.

After an stroke that ended his sailing career he began to study and met renowned preacher George Whitefield. If you want to read some real fire and brimstone sermons check out George Whitefield. Inspired by Whitefield he sought ordination in the Church of England and became a priest. It was during this time that he became active in the abolitionist movement in England and lived to see the end of the slave trade. He was also the spiritual advisor to William Wilberforce. Newton was a very popular preacher and his church was often packed to overflowing. He also wrote Glorious things of thee are spoken among many other hymns.

John Newton was one of those middle of the day hires and in the words of the hymn you can see his thankfulness and his response to the grace that he accepted. Now this wasn't the sudden complete conversion that some seem to tell about, but a slow and growing awareness of God at work in him. The point is that he responded to God's grace. Even though he didn't order the grits, he did eat them. He answered the call to go and work in the vineyard.

If God's grace can soften the heart of a person like John Newton, then God is certainly at work in all of ours. The question my friends is how is God working in your heart and how will you respond? So I ask you, will you eat your grits or not?